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Do suspensions make sense? Student views on school suspensions and ideas for change.

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A collection of student commentary from Students Speak Out: Milwaukee

In mid-April 2008, Milwaukee StudentsSpeakOut.org asked 22 students from Community High School and W.E.B. Du Bois High School, as well as some members of a community program called Running Rebels to interview one another about topics in education that mattered to them and the things that they would change at their schools. There were several themes that emerged and continued to develop through the student commentary and adult participation on the Web site following the initial workshop.

Suspensions and detentions proved to be one of the most popular topics with the students and the following is a collection of student views on the topic. The following are their views.

What do suspensions accomplish?

"I look at it like this: if you suspend somebody from school for three days, that's just like making a person that don't like vegetables stop eating vegetables for three days. It's like not really a positive thing at all. How could you punish somebody by doing something that they want you to do?"

"Suspensions kind of just back-hold the problem because usually when people are suspended they go and do whatever, then they come back and do something again, probably the same thing and they get suspended again. So suspensions are not beneficial in any way possible."

"I do not believe in suspensions. I don't believe in suspensions because once a student is punished and you send them home for three days and he misses out on three days of education, then three days- like at our school that's a whole- you miss one class that's like a whole week of homework. So you got them missing all them hours of class and then they stuck behind and then they say forget it and don't do it. So you're just screwing them up even more. OK they made a one bad decision, they probably had a bad day."

"Suspension is just a cycle of a student headed towards nowhere. What I mean is suspensions encourage the bad behavior of students."

"I don't see how anybody would think that a suspension does help a student. The only thing it's doing is kicking them out of school. I mean they're not here, they can't do anything. If they're supposed to be in school getting their education and you're suspending them, they can't achieve that so how is it benefiting them in any possible way? Especially if they're a student who constantly has behavioral problems I think you're just trying to settle the problem right then and there; but it's not really settling it. It's a deeper thing. You need to get to the root of the problem with the student instead of just sending them out there."

"I feel suspensions are necessary at times; but at other times they aren't necessary. [They are necessary] if a student does something that is wrong. Then they should be suspended. But I think sometimes there should be second chances because if you do get suspended you are missing your school time basically."

Are there alternatives to suspensions?

"Basically, I don't think removing anyone from the school scenario in any fashion is a plus in any way. If anything you should have them stay longer. How could you suspend somebody's learning time and expect any growth from that? It's like reverse psychology."

"They kind of tried to do in-house suspensions instead so that students stay in school and kind of get some of their work done. I think that's one solution to suspensions."

"Detentions are fine as long as you can do your work while you're in detention."

"They should sit down and talk with the student [and] ask them why. Why this is going on with them, you know? Just sit down and talk to them, counsel them before you just write them up to get them out of the school."

"I go with detentions, but you know a lot of students don't really serve them. They say 'ok, whatever' and then it leads to suspension again."

"I think teachers are really quick to suspend people. Usually they don't want to deal with the problem right then and there either because they just don't feel like it because they're human, or they don't want to interrupt the class or whatever like that. So they are quick to suspend a student. Usually for way longer than what's needed."

What do students do when they're not in school?

"[When students are suspended] some them get into trouble, I know. They go sell drugs or whatever. You do things that are in the community, you know. They have the opportunity so when they're not in school that's an open door for them to do whatever they want to. Usually when people are suspended they can go and do anything that's illegal especially if they're mad or upset. They do whatever basically."

Why do some students not come to school?

"I think school is a good thing but if somebody don't want to come to school I don't think they should be required to go to school. Initially like for elementary or middle school I think they should be required but like for high school, if they went through about 8 years already of school and they just don't want to come then why waste other people's education and time?"

"[Attendance is low] because kids, they want certain variety. They get sick of the same thing slapped on their desk over and over and over and over. They don't like that. They want some variety. They want teachers to explain it in new ways every time they teach something new."

Why do some students act out in class?

"Teachers don't know how to present education as a valuable thing to students."

"It's minor things that get into a child's mind sometimes, and I don't think teachers understand that. 'Cuz some teachers say, 'get over it.' But you can't get over it 'cuz your mind's set. You know, at that point when you're reaching puberty that's all you're thinking about, you know, what you're peers are thinking about."

"What about the students that constantly disrupt a class? They get warnings, they get detentions, then they get a suspension. Is there any other solution we can get from this that will stop them? I mean if they really wanted to

learn at school they wouldn't be disrupting anyway. So what's a solution we can do to help them learn and stay in school besides in house suspensions, because we know that gets them nowhere."

"I think one of the causes of students being disruptive in class is that teachers haven't found an effective way to discipline students. I don't mean the old fashioned way, the paddle, but a way to keep students attentive. I strongly believe that if you give a student motivation to do their work and do it in a way that is exciting, students will participate in class."

"Another cause for disruption in the class is one that teachers don't have too much control over. Students, sometimes, just need to learn respect for themselves and their peers. If the teacher has a good relationship with their students, and have an understanding, students will have more respect for the classroom."

ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it. StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 80 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding suspensions and expulsions, and other issues affecting students, using the site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: studentspeakout@map150.org